

TONGUES OF ANGELS: FEMININE STRUCTURE AND OTHER JOUISSANCE



Suzanne Barnard

“Strange” is a word that can be broken down in French—*étrange*,
être-ange . . .

—Lacan, Seminar XX

In *Encore*, Lacan poses—in the form of a series of questions—the possibility of a certain being beyond the fault line of sexual difference, an intimation of a real incarnation that, while not external to the symbolic, cannot be contained within it. Indeed, he even refers mysteriously to some sense in which the symbolic is not indifferent to this being but is affected by it—troubled, unsettled by its strangeness. The being that Lacan is concerned with here would hence be a question of a materialization across a division, across the “gap” between the symbolic and the real. To understand what Lacan might have in mind in these cryptic interrogatives requires some understanding of the transformation in the relationships between feminine structure, other jouissance, and knowledge that he effects in Seminar XX. These specific themes emerge in the context of Lacan taking up the cultural knot between sexuality and epistemology that Freud had, years earlier, marked as central to the question of culture itself. In his earlier work, Lacan had approached the relationship between sexuality and knowledge primarily in terms of its symbolic and imaginary coordinates. In *Encore*, however, he comes to formulate the relationship between feminine sexuality and knowledge more explicitly in terms of the relationship between the symbolic and the real.

Lacan’s first sustained attempt to articulate the relationship between the real and the symbolic is found in Seminar XI, the Seminar in which he most

clearly elaborates his by now well-known shift in emphasis from the subject of desire to the subject of drive. This shift reflects, among other things, Lacan's increasing preoccupation with understanding how the gap between the real and the symbolic affects the functioning of the symbolic itself. Just as Freud's confrontation with the enigmas of traumatic war neuroses led him to the "beyond" of pleasure, so too did Lacan's recognition of a certain morbid recalcitrance of the symptom to interpretation lead him to the "beyond" of desire. Lacan formulates this "beyond" in terms of the function of the real in the subject's relation to object *a* and the implications of this relation for the structure of the drive. However, in his return to the question of sexuality and knowledge in Seminar XX, one can discern another shift in focus, this time from the structure of drive to the structure of sexual difference. Thus in Seminar XX, Lacan's questioning of the relationship between the real and the symbolic is sustained more explicitly in relation to the relevance of sexual difference in understanding the nature of the gap between them.

In his formulas of sexuation, Lacan suggests that because women (feminine subjects) and men (masculine subjects) are "in" the symbolic differently, they each have a different relation to the Other. While man is coupled to the Other via object *a*, woman is "twice" related to the Other—coupled via the phallus and "tripled" via *S(A)*, the signifier of the lack in the Other. The feminine subject's "other" relation to the Other correlates with a jouissance "beyond" the phallus, a jouissance that belongs to that part of the Other that is not covered by the fantasy of the "One"—that is, the fantasy sustained by the positing of the phallic exception. As such, this form of jouissance is inscribed not in the repetitive circuit of drive but in what Lacan calls the *en-corps*, an "enjoying substance" which insists in the body beyond its sexual being (Seminar XX, 26/23). It is in the traces of jouissance inscribed in this *en-corps* that we can, perhaps, discern something of the *poesis*—the something coming from nothing—that Lacan links to the contingency of being and, ultimately, to the path of love.

THE UNDEAD

Regarding [the germ cell, one] can't say that it's life since it also bears death, the death of the body, by repeating it. That is where the *en-corps* comes from. It is thus false to say that there is a separation of the soma from the germ because, since it harbors this germ, the body bears its traces.

—Lacan, Seminar XX

As early as 1957–1958, Lacan began to consider unconscious desire in terms not of a transformative subversive force vis-à-vis the symbolic but as itself inescapably bound up with symbolic law. This position becomes explicitly articulated in Seminar XI, where Lacan claims that as a superego formation, paternal Law invokes a subject motivated by an inherently transgressive desire

(hence, his famous description of the superego as the imperious agent of enjoyment). Lacan credits Freud as one of the first to link the libidinal body with death, in other words, to suggest that the superego does not derive from social or psychological sources exclusively but is itself a structural component of desire. Desire is, therefore, always inextricably caught up with the symbolic Other that brings it into being and, as a result, within a morbid circuit of prohibition and transgression.

While the subject of drive also is “born” in relation to a loss, this loss is a real rather than a symbolic one. As such, it functions not in a mode of absence but in a mode of an impossible excess haunting reality, an irrepressible remainder that the subject cannot separate itself from. In other words, while desire is born of and sustained by a constitutive *lack*, drive emerges in relation to a constitutive *surplus*. This surplus is what Lacan calls the subject’s “anatomical complement,”¹ an excessive, “unreal” remainder that produces an ever-present jouissance. He locates the loss correlative with the emergence of the subject of drive within the structure of sexual reproduction:

Sexuality is established in the field of the subject through the way of lack. Two lacks overlap here. The first emerges from the central defect around which the dialectic of the advent of the subject to his own being in relation to the Other turns—by the fact that the subject depends on the signifier and that the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other. This lack takes up the other lack, which is the real, earlier lack, to be situated at the advent of the living being, that is to say, at sexed reproduction. The real lack is what the living being loses, that part of himself *qua* living being, in reproducing himself through the way of sex. This lack is real because it relates to something real, namely, that the living being, by being subject to sex, has fallen under the blow of individual death. (Seminar XI, 189/205)

Here Lacan is complicating his earlier account of sexuality in which he had focused primarily on the role of the symbolic in the generation of sexuality and sexual difference. In Seminar XX, he returns to this conundrum of overlapping lacks, suggesting that—beyond the structuring effect of the symbolic—sexuality has *also* to do with another splitting, this time involving a “real” deduction in being. This deduction is no simple subtraction, however, as it also produces something that while no longer “real” cannot be completely inscribed within the symbolic.

In *Encore*, Lacan elaborates on the significance of this deduction, this “blow of individual death,” through recalling Freud’s use of the distinction between germ and soma cells. Freud invokes this distinction in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to illustrate the tension between Eros and Thanatos. While Lacan claims that Freud was indeed attempting to trace an alternative trajectory of drive, he also suggests that Freud failed to recognize a certain loss inherent in sexual reproduction. More specifically, we see that in Freud’s account of that which exceeds or is “beyond” the pleasure principle, the life and death drives are maintained in a relatively oppositional, binary relationship. Hence, his account of the

role of germ cells in reproduction ultimately suffers from an emphasis on their generative and recuperative role, to the exclusion of what Lacan underscores is a “real” loss represented in the process of meiosis. Whereas Freud valorizes the germ cell’s role in “work[ing] against the death of the living substance and succeed[ing] in winning for it what . . . can only be regard[ed] as potential immortality,”² Lacan attends to genetic theory’s account of the “dominant function, in the determination of certain elements of the living organism, of a combinatory that operates at certain of its stages by the expulsion of remainders” (Seminar XI, 139/151). Hence, Lacan describes Thanatos—the force that thwarts the telos of Eros toward the One—as

obviously a metaphor that Freud is able to use thanks to the fortunate discovery of the two units of the germ, the ovum and the spermatozoon, about which one could roughly say that it is on the basis of their fusion that is engendered what? A new being. Except that that doesn’t happen without meiosis, a thoroughly obvious subtraction, at least for one of the two, just before the very moment at which the conjunction occurs, a subtraction of certain elements that are not superfluous in the final operation.³ (Seminar XX, 63/66)

Thus the germ cell cannot be exclusively associated with “Life” because—with the expulsion of its meiotic remainders—“it also bears death, the death of the body by repeating it” (Seminar XX, 11/5). As a result, Lacan says, Freud’s disjunctive pairing of “germ” with Life and “soma” with Death is false.

It is important to note here that by invoking the process of meiosis to illuminate the structure of the libidinal subject, Lacan is not mobilizing a biology or any (other) foundational form of materialist discourse. Rather, we can broadly understand his move here as a reframing of Freud’s opposition between Eros and Thanatos in terms of the impact of the gap between the real and the symbolic on the functioning of the symbolic itself. Within this frame, then, he is using meiosis as a trope to suggest a way in which the drive is not the fundamental ground of the subject but a *short circuit* of any closed loop of reproduction, of any fulfillment of Eros through a joining of complementary halves. In fact, the drive comes into being as the *disjunction* between sexuality and the accomplishment of Eros, the disjunction between sexuality and the union of the two in the One.

In addition, the death-in-life attending the “birth” of the subject of drive is not the whole story, for when Lacan states that the subtracted meiotic elements are “not without their place in the final operation,” he is referring to the way in which these elements do not disappear but serve to condition the status of the drive in an important way. This is so because the detritus of meiosis, its “waste,” returns to haunt the libidinal subject in the form of object *a*. Object *a* is a remainder *in excess* of the being produced via sex, a “scrap of the real” that exists as a residue of a strange form of life. This is what allows Slavoj Žižek to say that “for Lacan, the death drive is precisely the ultimate Freudian name for the dimension traditional metaphysics designated as that of *immortality*—for a

drive, a ‘thrust’ that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of generation and corruption . . . a strange, immortal, indestructible life that persists beyond death.”⁴ Thus the drive and the object are made of the same stuff and function together in this domain of “indestructible life”—the drive as an immortal *pulsion* that “circles around” the object as a scrap or remainder of asexual, “undead” life.

In both Seminar XI and “Position of the Unconscious,” Lacan refers to object *a*, this excessive, residual scrap of the real as the lamella—an “organ” without a body,⁵ which is, in the end, none other than libido itself. Several points of Lacan’s discussion of the lamella are worthy of note here. Shifting the terms of his origin myth from the germ cell to the fertilized egg, Lacan proposes to supplant Aristophanes’ myth of the androgynes with a less symmetrical scene.

Consider the egg in a viviparous womb where it has no need of a shell, and recall that, whenever the membranes burst, a part of the egg is harmed, for the membranes of the fertilized egg are offspring [*filles*] just as much as the living being brought into the world by their perforation. Consequently, upon cutting the cord, what the newborn loses is not, as analysts think, its mother, but rather its anatomical complement. Midwives call it the “afterbirth” [*délivre*].

Now imagine that every time the membranes burst, a phantom—an infinitely more primal form of life . . . takes flight through the same passage. (“Position of the Unconscious,” 273)

Here, then, as in meiosis, there is a remainder, a third term that “falls out” of the structure only to reemerge from within. The novelty of this second cycle of the origin myth is Lacan’s linking of the detritus of sexed reproduction to the trope of the placenta. He underscores that the lost object—the maternal Thing—is *not* the mother herself but the placenta. As such, the placenta is the “organ” that mediates the relationship between the mother and developing organism that is neither a “One” (it is not a matter of fusion or complementary unity) nor a “two” (it is not a matter of autonomy). Each inhabits or is inhabited by the other in a strange relationship that confounds counting and hence the boundaries between “inside” and “outside.” Thus Lacan suggests here that what is lost is not what it is retrospectively fantasized to be—that is, a union or whole—but rather a certain strange relation to the Other. This relation is not the “One” of undifferentiated fusion; neither is it the “One” formed by the union of two complementary halves; but it is, perhaps, . . . “not not One.”

In what is a more familiar Lacanian vignette, we find yet another turn in Lacan’s mythical cycle, this time in a further elaboration of the role of object *a* in the constitution of the body. In his rereading of Freud’s account of the *Fort-Da*, Lacan rejects the “old hat” interpretation that sees in little Ernst’s juxtaposition of phonemes with the action of the spool “an example of primal symbolization” (Seminar XI, 216/239). Rather, the spool “is not the mother reduced to a little ball . . . it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself” (ibid.,

60/62) from him while still remaining his, still retained. It is a split-off piece of the subject that allows him to traverse the “ditch” that his mother’s absence creates. Here Lacan explicitly links the production of object *a* to the emergence of the body “proper,” that is, to the subject marked by sex that gains significance at the point of entry into the symbolic. In other words, of particular interest in this version of the myth is the structural linkage between the to and fro action of the spool and Ernst’s articulation of phonemes—“letters”—that are taken as first signifiers. As signifiers, they are—like Ernst in his corporeality—split into two registers simultaneously, the registers of being and truth.

While in Seminar XI Lacan describes the lost object as an indestructible fragment of asexual, nonsymbolized libido that both masculine and feminine subjects lose with the advent of sexual being, in Seminar XX the object plays an important role in his account of sexual difference. What the two sexes lose is not their complementary lost half but an asexual “sameness,” libido not yet marked by castration or the cut of sexual difference. How is sexual difference related to this “death-in-life” that object *a* represents? In Seminar XX, Lacan suggests that men and women are ultimately positioned differently vis-à-vis this “death-in-life.” There would be, then, a different kind of jouissance for those with feminine structure than that produced and maintained in relation to object *a*. The feminine subject’s relation to $S(A)$ would produce an “Other jouissance” related to a different kind of “knowledge” of death-in-life.

Masculine and feminine structures are, in some sense then, distinguished in terms of the structure of the drive in relation to the Other. More specifically, the formulas of sexuation must be read in terms of how they inscribe the masculine and feminine subject’s relation to the real, how masculine and feminine structures are—each in its own way—a manifestation of the subject as an answer from the real. Thus Lacan’s account of sexual difference in Seminar XX can be understood as emerging from his progressive understanding of the impact of the gap between the real and the symbolic on the symbolic itself and, hence, on the structuration of the subject in its possible modes of relation to the real; in this context, his elaboration of feminine sexuality can be read as a manifestation of his preoccupation with the nature of this gap and the feminine subject’s relation to it.

INFINITY

Infinity: the limit that a function f is said to approach at $x = a$ when for x close to a , $f(x)$ is larger than any preassigned number.

—*American Heritage Dictionary*

In Lacan’s formulas of sexuation (Seminar XX, 73/78), one gets a glimpse of something that he will make more explicit later in the same Seminar, namely, that phallic jouissance and Other jouissance are produced within different logical frameworks that have a strange internal relationship to each other. He

begins his exposé of the formulas with the claim that “the lower line— $\forall x\Phi x$ —indicates that it is through the phallic function that man as whole acquires his inscription” (ibid., 74/79).⁶ Thus this formula, $\forall x\Phi x$, defines masculine subjects as “wholly” subject to the phallic function, which is the function of lack or of alienation within the symbolic. However, this “whole” is itself founded on the logical exception represented by the foreclosure of the phallic function from the set, “man,” that it determines. This is represented in the top line of the formulas for man, $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$. In other words, the negation of the phallic function provides a limit that produces man “wholly” with respect to it, which anchors the masculine subject firmly in the symbolic order. Hence, masculine or phallic jouissance is produced within the structure of a *finite logic*—as a closed set determined by a fixed limit that remains outside of or “extimate” to the set itself.

This latter formula of masculine sexuation suggests that the phallic function is itself limited by a certain functioning in fantasy of the exception that grounds it—the nonphallic exception of the primal father.⁷ Thus while man is “whole” within the symbolic, the exception that delimits him precludes him from fully identifying with castration. One could say that while man is wholly subject “to,” and hence “in,” the symbolic, he is “in it with exception,” that is, he “takes exception” to it in some way. As a result, the fantasy of a subject not subjected to Law—the fantasy of no limit—determines masculine structure in an essential way. The point here is that the masculine subject is effectively “caught” in the phallic function, ironically because he does not fully identify with it but maintains a kind of distance toward it through believing in an exception to symbolic Law.

In Seminar XX and elsewhere, however,⁸ Lacan suggests that the fullness of presence that the negation of castration represents is itself an illusion. In fact, it is in this light that Lacan’s equation of woman with the phallus can be perhaps most easily understood; the phallus is at once *both* the signifier of enjoyment and its negation. Hence, what the masculine subject does not recognize is that because Woman does not exist, phallic jouissance is limited by the remainder that forever escapes, that forever eludes his pursuit; this is the significance of the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise that Lacan invokes in Seminar XX (13/8). Paradoxically then, the figure that lends the symbolic its seeming integrity, its automatic and “Law-like” functioning, is only an illusion. Thus the deterministic, repetitive character of desire as it plays out in and through the symbolic functions only within the frame of a certain finite logic, one fixed by a constitutive exception. Moreover, it is an illusion that Woman as man’s symptom (e.g., the Lady, the Virgin Mother, etc.) is put to work in support of.

In turning to the formulas of feminine sexuation, however, Lacan suggests that it would be a mistake to read them strictly in accordance with Aristotelian logic, in other words, to assume, for example, that the laws of noncontradiction must apply. This sort of logic is only adequate to inscribing the symbolic constituted as finite through the postulate of the phallic exception. In *Encore*, Lacan

suggests that the structure of the not-whole Woman requires another sort of logic, a logic of the infinite rather than the finite. He states:

[Because] one can write “not-every (*pas tout*) x is inscribed in Φx ,” one deduces by way of implication that there is an x that contradicts it. But that is true on one sole condition, which is that, in the whole or the not-whole in question, we are dealing with the finite. Regarding that which is finite, there is not simply an implication but a strict equivalence. . . . There is an exception. But we could, on the contrary, be dealing with the infinite. . . . When I say that woman is not-whole and that that is why I cannot say Woman, it is precisely because I raise the question of a *jouissance* that, with respect to everything that can be used [encompassed] in the function Φx , is in the realm of the infinite. (Seminar XX, 94/102–3)

Here Lacan suggests that feminine structure (and hence, Other *jouissance*) is produced in relation to a “set” that *does not* exist on the basis of an external, constitutive exception. In other words, it is produced in relation to a set not haunted by a figure operating as a limit. Hence, feminine structure can be understood to undermine the functioning of the symbolic as structured by a founding limit or anchoring point. Perhaps another way of saying what amounts to the same thing is that the not-whole Woman—as “radically Other in the sexual relationship, or what can be said of the unconscious” (Seminar XX, 75/81)—has a view to the contingency of the signifier of the Other in its anchoring function. This means that she has a relation to the Other such that she “knows” that *neither she nor it knows*—in other words, she “knows” that the signifier of phallic power merely lends a certain mysterious presence to the Law that veils its real impotence.

However, this does not mean, in turn, that the not-whole of feminine structure is simply outside of or indifferent to the order of masculine structure. Rather, she is in the phallic function *altogether* or, in Lacan’s words, “She is *not* not at all there. She is there in full [*à plein*]” (Seminar XX, 71/77). Here Lacan seems to be playing with the way in which the double negation—“not not at all there”—works to effect a kind of affirmation, a strange form of positivity. The feminine subject inhabits the symbolic in this form, not as a simple absence but as a mode of presence that emerges from “beyond the veil” of phallic presence. In other words, the feminine subject is (wholly) alienated in the symbolic in such a way as to have a different relation to its limit. By being in the symbolic “without exception” then, the feminine subject has a relation to the Other that produces another “unlimited” form of *jouissance*.

Hence, Lacan claims that feminine and masculine subjects have a different relation to infinity. For man, the infinite is placed in the service of producing the One—finite and totalizable. For the feminine subject, it is a limit of “realization,” a relation to the contingency of Law that produces, engenders something new rather than keeps the “idiotic,” repetitive circuit of the drive going. This is effected not in relation to Law and lack but rather in relation to $S(A)$, the signifier of the lack in the Other. It is, in other words, effected in a relation

to “undeath.” For woman, hence, the object does not haunt subjectivity as a promised but necessarily avoided plenitude but as a nontraumatic signifier of the lack in the Other. This other relation to the Other (via $S(\mathcal{A})$) is one that although not unrelated to Law recognizes the contingency and failures of the law and, one could even say, both exhorts from and returns to the Law a certain strange corporeality.

What the paradoxical structure of the feminine subject ultimately reveals is the way in which the consistency of the symbolic, and of the gap between the symbolic and real, is susceptible to the “unsettling” effect of the real. In other words, it reveals that insofar as one “is” in the symbolic via the limit placed by an unsymbolizable element, the symbolic and real are separated by a traumatic gap—a “ditch” that the subject relies on object *a* to “play at jumping” (Seminar XI, 60/62). However, while this gap holds within the universe of masculine structure—a universe in which the phallic exception is instituted *from the outside*—for feminine structure there exists the possibility for a provisional “master” signifier that is not instituted from without but from *within*; this institution of a master signifier from within would be produced through a contingency, via *tuché* as encounter.⁹ Another way of saying this is that without the constitutive illusion of the phallic exception as limit, the *symbolic becomes*, in a sense, *real*. One way of conceptualizing feminine jouissance consistent with this claim might be to say that in feminine jouissance, the real finds a signifier.

ANGEL-BEING

It is a truly miraculous function to see, on the very surface emerging from an opaque point of this strange being, the trace of these writings taking form, in which one can grasp the limits, impasses, and dead ends that show the real acceding to the symbolic.

—Lacan, Seminar XX

How might we understand feminine jouissance as correlative with the real finding a signifier? In *Encore*, Lacan introduces two figures that, while he does not explicitly elevate them to the status of myth, are reminiscent of the mythical figurations of object *a* in Seminar XI. These two figures of being “beyond” the symbolic—the strange being of the angel and the spider—suggest the nature of the materialization across the gap between symbolic and real that the real “finding” a signifier represents. Returning to the notion of object *a* as an unsymbolizable scrap of the real, we could, perhaps, represent the real finding a signifier through the denotation $S(a)$.¹⁰ Hence, one can retroactively (re)read Lacan’s account of the object in Seminar XI through the lens of his later account of sexual difference as a means of grasping what is at stake in the feminine subject’s relation to $S(\mathcal{A})$ or to $S(a)$.

In Seminar XI, Lacan suggests that the lamella—as organ of an indestructible, infinitely proliferating life—is the libido itself. The objects *a* are “merely

its representatives, its figures. The breast . . . as an element characteristic of the mammiferous organization, the placenta for example . . . certainly represents that part of himself that the individual loses at birth, and which may serve to symbolize the most profound lost object" (Seminar XI, 198/180). The libido and its objects *a* can be understood to function like organs in the everyday sense of the term, in that they operate both semi-autonomously and in support of metabolic and (at least in the case of phallic jouissance) regulatory processes. However, Lacan's meaning diverges from popular usage in that he describes these organs not as hierarchically organized or structured systems but as *surfaces* without centralized functions or any "proper" demarcation of inside and outside. With this definition, Lacan clearly distinguishes his account of the object as organ from traditional psychoanalytic notions of the object, notions that assume, above all, an "affinity of *a* to its envelope" (Seminar XX, 85/93).

In emphasizing the difference between his account of the object and those of other psychoanalytic accounts, Lacan underscores the importance of conceptualizing the organ-libido as a *surface*. He states, "[T]his image [the lamella] shows 'libido' to be what it is, namely, an organ, to which its habits make it far more akin than to a force field. Let's say that it is *qua* surface that it orders this force field" ("Position of the Unconscious," 274). Additionally, the libido (as surface-organ) and the objects *a* (its figures) exist in an *ectopic* rather than an internal relation to the subject.

In standard biomedical terms, an ectopia represents an abnormal positional and functional relation between a body (as signified) and one of its organs or parts. This reading of the libido-organism coupling can be seen as exemplary of the paradoxical tension inscribed in masculine structure. Within masculine structure, the drive remains haunted by the image of phallic presence, despite the fact that the masculine subject's place in the symbolic is fixed by its *exclusion*. Hence, one consequence of the masculine subject's attempts to realize the object of desire (to make it exist)¹¹ is the (paradoxical) risk of dissolving the order within which *he* exists. As a result, he must remain at a certain distance from the object of his desire in order to maintain his sexual position. This is what Lacan refers to as the risk of annihilation that the masculine subject takes in approaching the object. In other words, for the masculine subject, the flip side of the fantasy of the "One" is the horror of a loss of being (existence) evoked, ironically, by a recognition of lack in the Other. Hence, within the logic of masculine structure, the gap between the symbolic and the real must be maintained in order to protect the subject from a loss of being. To use the terms that Lacan deploys in Seminar XX to distinguish between the symbolic and real "faces" of the Other, one could describe the masculine subject's relation to object *a* as the site of an irreparable disjunction between being and truth.

However, while the masculine subject struggles to maintain a proper distance with respect to the object, he nevertheless suffers from an excess jouissance produced within the trajectory of his vacillation, within the to and fro of

the repetitive circuit of drive. This is the “pathological” jouissance of the object as representative of the organ-libido; missing from its proper position the object reappears “out of place,” as a foreign body, an enjoying substance that threatens the integrity of the signified (sexual) body. In other words, within the logic of masculine structure, object *a* can be thought of as an organ out of place and out of proportion, an organ that has no proper boundaries and hence no internal relation to “its” organism but, rather, functions in a manner that destabilizes the boundary between the sexual (symbolic) body and the “flesh” of the real.

In its potential for a dual reading, Lacan’s invocation of such a relation between the libido and the subject foreshadows his later account of the character of the feminine subject’s relation to $S(\mathcal{A})$. From the Lacanian postulate that the feminine subject is “in” the symbolic without exception (hence, her failure to exist within it), we can conclude that she has the potential for a relation to the object that is absent the traumatic dimension of semblance that characterizes the masculine subject’s relation to the object. In other words, given her not-whole relation to the Other, the feminine subject can have a different relation to the lack in the Other. Lacan’s account of this potential relation allows for a “nonpathological” reading of ectopia. What appears within the phallic economy of masculine structure as a threat to the subject’s existence emerges here as the possibility of a contingent encounter, of a heterogenous coupling that produces an “other” jouissance—one inscribed in the en-corps and, hence, which insists in the body beyond its sexual being.

Here Lacan’s description of the peculiar qualities of the organ-libido as an infinitely proliferating, regenerative, and heterogeneous surface evokes the characteristics of contiguous space as defined within elliptical (Riemannian) geometry. In Riemannian space, relations between its heterogeneous elements (or, more accurately, *vicinities*) are not predetermined and can be effected in an infinite number of ways. We could, then, understand the contingent encounter between the feminine subject and the lack in the Other—the encounter manifest as Other jouissance that produces what Lacan calls “being effects”—in terms of the properties of Riemannian surfaces. In this case, the coupling of heterogenous elements represented by the organ-libido and the subject can be understood to produce, via Other jouissance, a strange signifier—a letter—one we might perhaps signify as $S(a)$.

Ultimately, Lacan more explicitly suggests that the feminine subject’s “ex-sistent” relation to the symbolic allies her jouissance, not with the signifier as signifying, but instead with the signifier’s *ex-sistence*. Thus she has a (potential) relation to the real face of the Other that he elaborates on in Seminar XX as the *signifierness* of the signifier, or the “being” of the letter. Here he attempts to transmit something of this being of the letter via the letter of mathematical formalization, or the *matheme*.

It is useful to remember that Lacan defends his use of *mathemes* on the basis of their role in transmitting psychoanalysis as a *praxis*, or a particular practice of learning, rather than as a static corpus of knowledge. For example, in

“The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” he claims that mathemes are not “transcendent signifier[s],” but are instead indices of “an absolute signification,” designed to “allow for a hundred and one different readings, a multiplicity that is acceptable as long as what is said about it remains grounded in its algebra” (*Écrits*, 313–14/816).¹² Hence, while the “letter-al” quality of the *matheme* will always be secondarily caught up in a “will to truth,” as manifest in knowledge that aims at the One, in its *stupidity* and *opacity* (its “absolute signification”) it also bears a particular relation to being, to being as a corporeal effect of the Other’s *jouissance*. In Seminar XX, Lacan evokes the image of a spider web to suggest the nature of the material surface of language that the letter represents in its potential for producing such being-effects. He suggests that it is as a “surface” with the “dimensions that writing requires” that the “textual work” of the spider web can illustrate a certain relation between feminine structure and $S(\mathbb{A})$ (Seminar XX, 86/93). The figure of the web renders an example of a network of letters, of material marks or tracings that do not in and of themselves “mean” anything but nevertheless—like the heterogeneous, contingently juxtaposed elements in Riemannian space—have certain discernible effects on *what can be known*. The web as a network of letters also emerges from an “opaque” or nonsignifying corporeal locus, one “beyond” and yet paradoxically internal to the body as signifying.

Combined with the alternative reading of the libido-subject ectopia that I have sketched above, this feminine figure of the spider web allows for a retro-active (re)interpretation of the myth of the lamella. To begin with, the figure of the web reorients the drama of the lamella around the “tripled” relationship between the subject-to-be and the (m)Other. In this tripled figuration, the lamella can be seen to function—like the web—as a nonsignifying material mediation corresponding to the corporeal being of the letter. Rather than the pathological ectopic coupling of the object and subject associated above with masculine structure, the tripling of the feminine subject to the (m)Other presents a figure of material *jouissance* that cannot be reduced to the metaphysical “One” of Aristophanes, or even to the “countable” one of the modern science of the real. Rather, the tripled figure of the (m)Other-placenta-subject-to-be is one that confounds counting, that prevents a rehabilitation of the One via any form of biunivocalization. As a “not not One,” it can only ex-sist in the domain of the infinite. As this strange, irreducible form of positivity, it also evokes a strange *jouissance* that is simultaneously “inside” of and yet beyond the body. Lacan describes this *jouissance* as produced by the way in which libido—as “this lamella that the organism’s being takes to its true limit”—goes further than the body’s limit and, in so doing, prefigures a certain being yet to come (“Position of the Unconscious,” 275). However, in this “feminine” reconstruction of the scene, the lamella “meets up” with the real Other at the point of the (m)Other’s lack, calling forth an asexual *jouissance* that could be described as of the “body” of the Other but precisely at the point at which it is not whole.

Finally, Lacan invokes the angel as yet another iteration of the material mediation of the feminine subject's contingent encounter (*tuché*) with the real face of the Other. The angel—neither a “being” nor of Being—is an asexual creature who inhabits the space between life and death and who is outside of time and hence immortal. The “angel-being” which Lacan alludes to throughout Seminar XX represents another figure of the strange positivity of the letter's “being.” As an emissary of the real Other (or, as Lacan says, the “God-face” of the Other), the angel is engaged as a response to the Other's lack, taking leave from the point at which the Other is not whole in relation to the subject. As such, the angel does not carry a message but rather a “pro-clamation,” which in its Latin origin suggests a “crying forth.” Like the flesh of the placenta and the opaque textual surface of the spider web, the angel functions as a nonsignifying corporeal mediation between the feminine subject and the “other” face of the Other. As such, the angel is not simply real nor symbolic but a form of undead or “not not being” that serves as a figure of the possibility for a “real-izing” of the gap between the symbolic and the real.

While Lacan does not explicitly link this figure to the lamella or the spider's “letters,” these three figures can be understood to come together in his notion of *lalangue*, or llanguage. In his earlier work, Lacan relied on the distinction between the statement and the enunciation in his attempts to articulate the relationship between language and the unconscious. In “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” for example, he associates the statement with the ego and the conscious dimension of speech; in contrast, the enunciation corresponds to the subject of the unconscious and its speaking (via slips of the tongue, etc.). In Seminar XX, however, Lacan presents us with a further refinement of this earlier distinction, as his preoccupation with the feminine subject's relation to S(A) leads him increasingly to consider the function of the written in psychoanalysis. Writing, or the production of letters, “constitutes a medium that goes beyond speech” (Seminar XX, 86/93) and, consequently, beyond enunciation. The locus of this beyond is not to be found in language but in llanguage. Consider Lacan's statement that, “If I have said that language is what the unconscious is structured like, that is because language, first of all, doesn't exist. Language is what we try to know concerning the function of llanguage” (Seminar XX, 126/138). And llanguage is associated not with the unconscious meaning or signifying effects discernible in the symbolic but with affects or “being-effects” of the (m)Other tongue. Thus Lacan here describes the speaking being not simply in terms of the ego and the subject of the unconscious but as

that being [which] provides the occasion to realize just how far the effects of llanguage go, in that it presents all sorts of affects that remain enigmatic. Those affects are what result from the presence of llanguage insofar as it articulates things by way of knowledge that go much farther than what the speaking being sustains by way of enunciated knowledge. (Seminar XX, 126–27/139)

Hence, Lacan understands language—as the (m)Other tongue—to be the language of the being that ex-sists in Other jouissance. This jouissance can be heard in the “body” of language—the letter of the body—just as it was first heard in the tone and rhythm of the mother(s) tongue. This jouissance also is associated with what we might call the “navel” of the unconscious, that is, the absent origin of the unconscious beyond which interpretation and knowledge proper cannot reach. While it does not “know,” that is, does not signify any-thing, Lacan suggests that this jouissance “creates,” that it engenders being nonetheless.¹³ As the materialization in the body of the angel’s enigmatic heralding, Other jouissance leaves its traces of a future being. Perhaps it is in this way that we can hear it, as in the tongues of angels, as *annunciation*—knowledge of *a*-being, of incarnation yet to come.

NOTES

1. Jacques Lacan, “Position of the Unconscious,” in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 273.

2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1961), p. 48.

3. Lacan is referring here to the process of cell division entailed in the formation of gametes (ova and sperm). In meiosis, a germ cell with two pairs of double-stranded DNA undergoes two divisions, with the consequent production of four haploid cells.

4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), p. 294, emphasis added.

5. See Lacan, “Position of the Unconscious,” p. 275.

6. See the schema of the formulas of sexuation in the Introduction to this book.

7. The primal father is only one of the figures Lacan uses to invoke the status of the exception that conditions the symbolic; there are other “Names-of-the Father,” perhaps most notably in this context the figure of the Lady in courtly love. For a discussion of the Lady as a “Name-of-the Father,” see Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), chapter 4.

8. See *The Seminar, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), chapter XI.

9. Lacan links *automaton* to the symbolic order, or “network of signifiers,” and as such, he relates it to the effects of the signifier that appear to be arbitrary but are ultimately determined by the insistence of the signifier in the trajectory of the subject’s desire. In contrast to *automaton*, *tuché* as causality is a wholly arbitrary, incalculable, and purely heteronomous form of chance. As such, it is beyond both consciousness and the unconscious effects of language in the structuring of desire. Lacan refers to it as a *cause*, because it produces being-effects.

10. I am indebted to Bruce Fink for this particular nomenclature and the way of conceptualizing S(A) that it implies. He refers to S(a) as a notation for the real finding a signifier in a footnote to chapter 8, “There’s No Such Thing As a Sexual Relationship,” in *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 115, 195, n.36.

11. One could perhaps understand this (ultimately halfhearted) attempt at “making” the object exist as something the masculine subject “plays” at—as in Ernst’s to and fro game with the spool.

12. J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). All translations have been modified to reflect the new forthcoming translation of *Écrits* by Bruce Fink.

13. A recent news article in the *Manchester Guardian* contained an uncanny example of the perversion of such an engendering within masculine structure. Genetic engineers have been working to isolate the DNA fragment from spiders responsible for the resiliency of their web filaments and to exponentially magnify its potency. It will then be combined with the DNA of goats to produce goats whose milk will contain pliable fibers with a tensile strength much greater than that of steel. This new fiber will be marketed for use in surgical suturing and, perhaps more interesting for the subtending fantasy that it reveals, to “catch” jets landing at high speeds on aircraft carriers.

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